Managing Disagreements at School

Supporting you to be your best
Managing Disagreements

We all get into disagreements at work from time to time, so it’s important to learn how to manage them productively. The end goal is to hopefully re-establish a peaceful working relationship, but it’s necessary to first mitigate the situation and negotiate a resolution between the two parties. Disagreements at work are often sparked by changes in workload or job roles, poor communication, inadequate training or personality and cultural differences, but there can be many other reasons.

**Personality clashes**
Different personalities can inevitably lead to disagreements, whether it be due to differences in teaching philosophies, communication styles or purely different mannerisms.

**Working styles**
Colleagues may disagree or misunderstand one another’s working style. One teacher may encourage creative thinking in his or her pupils, whereas another may prefer to apply a more heavily structured curriculum. If planning lessons together, one teacher may leave it to the last minute, causing the other stress.

**Power struggles**
Roles in the workplace can sometimes be unclear. This can result in one person assuming control over other staff against their consent, or staff members feeling unclear about whom they should report to.

Staff members may have had past struggles that were never completely resolved, causing them to resurface later in unrelated situations. Conflict may have arisen because of competition for the same resources or opportunities, resentment over a colleague’s management style, or bullying in the workplace.

**Change in workload or roles**
Have there been cutbacks? Did one staff member receive a promotion while another did not? Employees can become fearful about their job security, or resentful about being supervised by someone they previously regarded as their equal. Additionally, extra work can cause added pressure, which inevitably breeds an environment of tension and conflict.

**Needs and expectations**
Conflict often arises when one does not feel that his or her needs and expectations are sufficiently met. Most employees can agree on a certain number of shared needs: expectations for pay, job satisfaction, fair supervision, amicable working relationships and a healthy work-life integration. Other needs vary from person to person: one person may do their job because they enjoy sharing knowledge with others, while another may do it to satisfy their own curiosity and need for research. One teacher may be looking for respect and esteem, while another only wants to impart knowledge to others.
Resolving Conflict in Working Relationships

Although disagreements in some form or another are inevitable, there are steps that can be taken to minimise the risk, or resolve them efficiently when they occur.

**Match complementary personality styles**
This may not always be possible, but it can be a good idea for head teachers to try and group staff who have complementary personality styles. You may find that some personalities may start off working well together and the relationship becomes strained over time. In these situations, fostering an honest discussion between the two parties, with a mediator if needed, may help to improve understanding.

**Establish clear roles and expectations**
Establish a clear hierarchy and make sure everyone knows who they report to. In the case of any cutbacks, it may also help to reassure remaining staff that their positions are secure. Offer time-management tips to help with new workloads and, where possible, allow staff flexibility in their schedules and deadlines. On projects where two colleagues butt heads, the creation of firm expectations, division of roles or explicit procedural instructions can help minimise conflict. That way, each person can work independently on their part of the project.

Where colleagues disagree over teaching styles, try to establish common, standardised targets that each must reach. Each can then see that they both get comparable results from their pupils, despite having different approaches. These goals would have to be measured objectively (e.g. by standardised test scores, etc.).

**Resolve past issues**
Revisit what caused the initial conflict and try to resolve it. Any instances of bullying should be addressed in the same way that standard bullying policies are implemented (e.g. as a disciplinary action or grievance).

**Get to know your staff**
It is important to assess what motivates one person over another. Try to identify what is at the root of the problem – for example, they may be outwardly asking for a pay rise, but what truly motivates them is recognition. Their needs may be best met by granting something other than (or in addition to) what they asked for initially.

**Consider employee feedback**
Regularly monitoring staff satisfaction can be useful information for management. Gather feedback through anonymous surveys, and where feasible, implement any ideas for improvement that have been shared by the staff.
Parents and teachers may disagree about classwork, curriculum, teaching style, assignments or how peer relationships are managed. In these situations, it is important for teachers to keep in mind that they and the parent are both committed to the student’s welfare (although they may have different approaches and end goals for the same student). A teacher’s role may include imparting structure and discipline in order to run the classroom smoothly, and ensuring that national and school curriculum requirements are met so that the student succeeds in exams. A parent will understand and view their child in a different context than a teacher does and may feel defensive when discussing the student’s progress. Here are some tips for avoiding conflict with parents:

**Keep an open line of communication**

Involves parents in the students’ learning and progress. Let them know about classroom activities and what the curriculum and goals are for the year. Alert them to when you are available, how you may be contacted and when they are welcome to come and visit or speak to you. Preparing parents for any items to be discussed in parent-teacher conferences may also help them feel more secure and less defensive in meetings.

**Conflict**

Conflict often brews from unresolved fear or power struggles (e.g. feeling misunderstood, or being undermined). Ask what parents’ goals and expectations are for their child that year. This communication can create a better understanding and also make the parents feel that they are an active part in their child’s educational development.

**Know the policy**

Learn about your school’s official policy on disagreements and grievances between parents and teachers, so you know what steps to follow should the need arise. This should be in your employee handbook, if available, or check with your human resources department. It is a good idea to make sure you have the policy in writing.

**Use discretion**

If you have any concerns about a student, policy, or relationship with a parent or colleague, be careful where and when you discuss this. It is not a topic for discussion in the break room where other staff or students can overhear. It is a violation of the parents’ privacy to voice their concerns indiscriminately. Instead, it is best discussed with someone you trust in a private setting.
Managing Disagreements Constructively

If you can’t avoid conflict, it’s helpful to learn how to manage it constructively. First, try to informally ask for advice from your union or manager. If that does not resolve the issue, go through your workplace’s official grievance procedure. The process for resolving disputes in schools is typically:

1. Talk to class/subject teacher
2. Meet with head teacher
3. Talk to local authority
4. Engage in mediation

Self-help strategies

Many disagreements can be resolved early by the affected having a discussion to clear up any misunderstanding. If appropriate, start with an apology. If not, at least acknowledge the other party’s feelings and concerns. By doing this, you are showing them that they are being taken seriously and that you respect their viewpoint. A failure to do so can lead to an escalation of the situation, sometimes unnecessarily. If this does not work, it may have to be escalated to more formal grievance proceedings.

Determine your power

What can you control and what can’t you? Focus on what you can influence and what is not your responsibility.

Write it out

Write out all your feelings in a letter to prepare for the meeting. Extract the matter-of-fact items from your concerns and put it into a list to discuss with the other party. Re-word any talking points in your list so that they are non-confrontational, while still being clear. Make sure to separate the issue from any heated feelings you have about the person, and try to keep it to facts. Use ‘I’ statements – ‘I felt a lack of respect’ vs. ‘you were disrespectful of me’, and so on.

Speak in person and listen

Tone of voice and meaning can easily be misinterpreted in emails and texts. Instead, schedule some time to sit down and talk to each other. Listen to their point of view and ask them to clarify their concerns.

Step into the other person’s shoes

Try and imagine where the other person is coming from and what is motivating their perspective. Remember that two people can have drastically different views of the same situation, so this can help foster better understanding in any conflict situation.

Calm down

Take a breath and count to 10. Avoid any sudden outbursts that are just expelled emotion and not rational thought. Also try to be aware of when the other person is doing the same thing (just reacting emotionally), as it may prevent you from taking offense.

Be aware of non-verbal communication

Take notice of your body language, choice of words and tone of voice. Ask to clarify where the other person is coming from if you do not understand what they mean. Speak slowly, as this can calm both of you down.
When it comes to resolving disputes between students and teachers in higher education (HE) versus further education (FE), the tactics do not vary much. However, in HE, disputes are not sent to the local authority to resolve, whereas in FE they are. Every HE institution needs to have a fair complaints procedure in place when a student disagrees or complains about an issue. This is usually resolved at the HE level and does not require a third party getting involved. If these issues cannot be resolved, it will usually go to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator.

Office of the Independent Adjudicator
www.oiahe.org.uk
As per the Higher Education Act 2004, all universities in England and Wales must subscribe to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA), an independent body that reviews individual complaints by students against universities. The OIA has no regulatory powers over universities and cannot punish or fine them.